

Education in War, A Public School in North Waziristan

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Pakistan entered into war against terror in 2001 and North Waziristan Agency became a focal point from 2005 onwards. Waziristan is the hub of all terrorist activities, names like Haqqanni and Gul Bahadiur along with Baitullah Mahsud are most notable in this field. Osama bin Laden started his career at Khost alongside Wazirs during Afghan War. North Waziristan is one of the several political agencies on Pakistan side of Durand Line, majority created by British starting from 1895. These are inhabited by warrior tribes who regards education as non manly and something fit for an idolater. Every tribe has a Hindu family responsible for the correspondence with political agent and for maintaining regular peace accords with him.

North Waziristan has one of the highest number of religious seminaries in Pakistan {over 1800} thus every new generation is brought up with same zeal and ideas in which their predecessors were raised; mainly a hate for the western culture. North Waziristan covers an area of 2318 square miles. Tochi Valley from Datta Khel to Khajuri is fertile and intensively cultivated with the water of the Tochi River. On its North West is Afghanistan, in the North East is Kurram Agency, in the South is South Waziristan, in the East is Bannu and Kohat Divisions.

Much of the North Waziristan is incredibly bare, The area is in reality largely unpopulated, the tribesmen congregating in villages and hamlets situated in the less arid portions of the valleys or the areas which lie within their reach of grazing grounds. It would appear from the topography of the area that at one time the whole region was largely covered with woods but the reckless cutting of trees has altered the character of land and climate. In the hills, cultivation is practiced on every flat piece of ground. Due to these natural conditions the population remains pastoral, migratory and restless.

Main towns in North Waziristan are Datta Khel Miranshah, Boya, Mir Ali, Razmak, Shiwa, Dosali and Ghulam Khan. All these are located on the river banks or water source. Small villages are scattered all over the agency. The inhabitants live in villages of all sizes. The general grouping and frequency of villages vary from valley to valley but these are invariably defended by mud bricks wall and towers. A peculiarity of many Wazir villages is their close proximity to large caves, to which the tribesmen have access as dwelling places in winter for the sake of protection from harsh weather. These caves are also admirable as air raid shelters. The way of life is as primitive as it was almost thousand years in every aspect not only in terms of construction of houses but also in the form of social values which are termed as Riway. Each village is the home of a certain clan which for all practical purposes

acts and behaves as a sovereign state, formulating and ratifying treaties and declaring war providing amnesty and shelter to outlaws from other clans depending upon either a collective decision or at times acting at their own will. Surrounding grazing grounds are joint property and so are fruit trees and orchards.

There is no central hereditary power junta rather it varies with time to time. Polygamy is a common practice which becomes a necessity because of frequent feuds and war. There is no concept of population control rather more the children stronger is the clan and tribe. Women are treated with respect and are seldom seen outside their walled compounds. Kidnapping or rape of females is a rarity. The practising religion is the Sunni sect of Islam. Elders are respected, Jirga is the parliament of the clan where collective decisions are taken and are bound to be observed.

Tochi Scouts with its headquarters at MiranShah was raised as North Waziristan Militia by Captain Davie Fergusson in 1900, the very first Victoria Cross was awarded to Captain Eustace Jotham in 1915, he was serving in North Waziristan Militia.

So how does children live and get education in such environments, There were educational institutions in the MiranShah yet there was a need to impart a kind of education which should be modern, nationalistic and religious in nature something which was possible only with the administrative back up of Tochi Scouts only. In 2001 Tochi scouts started a small school in one of its vacant land, it was the brainchild of Commandant Colonel Wajahat Chaudhary

Initially 100 children were admitted in classes from I-V which by end October 2002 increased to 142 and classes were also upgraded till VIII.

Tochi Scouts advanced a loan of Rupees 400,000{ £ 2500} and local elders donated Rupees 45,000{300£}. Initially there were only nine teachers out of which four were females and four male instructors were provided by the Tochi Scouts who were all from education branch, one teacher from civil was also employed. For administrative purpose one Junior Commissioned Officer and one Non Commissioned Officer were deputed. One librarian, a sweeper and a mali [gardener] were also part of the establishment. Facilities of conveyance and canteen were also catered.

In the ab-initio period the emphasis was on education and to improve the general layout of the area. Credit goes to the Tochi Scouts all ranks for making this venture a success story, by end 2012 there are over 516 students studying from Class I-IO.

In 2001 none could foresee the chain of events that were about to unfold in the North Waziristan Agency; without any exaggeration it is safe to write that the most effective weapon, most constructive dialogue, most obvious evidence against the fundamentalism, most active defence against the attacks on the very ideology of Pakistan is this very school. In this school the students comes from all shades of life, there are seven girls also who are studying along with boys, the very first in North Waziristan Agency. Today when none can walk out of fort and none can come in; it is this very school which represents the semblance of normalcy among all warring parties.

In the early days the parents were allowed to drop and pick their most precious item from the gates of the school but with the changing security environments the vehicular movement was stopped thus these students were dropped at the colony gate from where they now have to walk almost a kilometre to reach their alma mater in winter and summer; surprisingly the ratio of late comers is no worse than any other school anywhere in the world. It is heart-warming, touching, moving to see these young toddlers carrying their bags of books and walking this distance amidst gunfire and rocket shrilling noise. Their daily assembly at times coincides with the rocket attacks on the fort and surrounding areas by the miscreants, words are not enough to praise the courage of these students and salute to their parents who are suffering all this pain and agony for the better future of their children. Many a times it has happened that neither the students can leave the premises and nor their parents can come in because a battle is raging; Tochi Scouts then takes the responsibility of providing food, shelter and ensuring the safety of children. One student's father is earning his living by making ropes out of Date's palm which is barely enough to maintain his dignity; he is residing near Ghulam Khan and daily travels almost seven kilometres on foot to drop and pick his son, he cannot afford to pay the fare of a transport. Tochi Scouts on learning his dedication waived all fees. There is a girl student who has six elder sisters yet his parents are dedicated, motivated and educated enough to ensure that all their daughters get good education. These students in fact provides a beacon of knowledge into the very heart of the social and cultural fibre of the society; which has been misrepresented, misreported and misinterpreted by those who have seldom set a foot in the agency.

Initially the uniform was shorts, shirt and a tie which was welcomed by the locals later in 2007 the Taliban threatened them with dire consequences and uniform was changed into shalwar kameez for the safety of students.

A Computer & Internet Café was also opened alongwith the inauguration of school; it was supposed to be operated independently and it did so for a short time but later it was amalgamated into the main school. In 2007, HeadquartersFrontierCorps sanctioned amount worth Rupees 5 Million{£ 60,000} for the construction of Boys Hostel in the school, 1.5 Million Rupees was released in the first phase which was completed by end 2008 with 35 students accommodated in hostel. When the overall project will be completed then it would be able to accommodate 75 students. The living environments are excellent, tiled television room, library, nourishing food provided free of cost by the Tochi Scouts, a disciplined routine which starts with Fajr prayers, breakfast, school, lunch, rest, games, evening tea/milk, prep, recreation and early to bed. Students from other agencies are also accommodated in the hostel, Orakzai Agency (3), MirAli (28), MiranShah (5), Datta Khel (27), Ghulam Khan (1) are studying and living in hostel.

Sports plays a key role in the development of a child's character, like other boys these boys also love cricket; few of them have all the making and temperament of being a next Shahid Afridi or Waseem Akram. At evening games period there are no less than half a dozen boys teams playing cricket. Tochi Scouts provided them with sports gear. Tochi Scouts provide free education to war orphans. By end 2010 the strength of students increased to 320 with classes upgraded till matric, there are eight civilian teachers including two females for Montessori and 12 Frontier Corps teachers.

Majority of the students when enrolled are not conversant in Urdu but by the end of their first year in school they are able to convey their meaning in Urdu and English. There are regular activities of extra-curricular, debates, drama, sports gala, art competition, and poetry and so on. It is tragic that majority of students enrolled in school and especially living in hostel have lost their father in the on-going conflict thus they are handled with love and care. The effects and impacts of insurgency is visible through their eyes and actions, their written work represents it. They all hate violence, they love peace, they love moderation, enlightenment, freedom, democracy and above all, each one has a dream and desire to enlist in Pakistan Army and Tochi Scouts.

Computer cell and library were upgraded with the assistance of 7 Infantry Division. By end 2012 the school have an area of 13 acres.